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THON



THOME
All photos: Gregory Drezdson

BY ANTHONY CASTROVINCE MLB.COM

The Jim Thome Story will not be written by Jim Thome. He is still having a hard time processing the baseball life that led him to Cleveland and to Cooperstown. The corn-fed, Midwest-bred ballplayer with the broad shoulders and big swing arose out of obscurity to become not just one of the more productive players in Indians history, but surely one of the most beloved. Now he's headed into the National Baseball Hall of Fame, and words escape him.

"I'm going to need to find a dictionary," the 47-year-old Thome said. "I don't know enough words to describe my feelings."

So we'll provide the words for Thome. We'll tell the story of this humble hero — a gentleman who graced the game not just with his prodigious power but with his pleasant personality and pure heart — who can now call himself a first-ballot Hall of Famer.

THE CHILDHOOD STORY

Hall of Fame hitting wasn't just the hallmark of Jim Thome's Major League career. It was rooted deep into the Peoria, Illinois native's DNA.

Let the record show that long before Big Jim got his Cooperstown call, his Grandpa Chuck, his Uncle Art and his Aunt Carolyn were all inducted in the fast-pitch softball wing of the Peoria Sports Hall of Fame. And Carolyn is also a member of the Amateur Softball Association Hall of Fame and the Illinois State Softball Hall of Fame.

"Jimmy's a good young player," a Peoria native named Chuck Siebel told *Sports Illustrated* in 1998. "But his aunt could rip it!"

Thome's emergence in the Majors was like some predestined family feat finally realized. Perhaps his grandpa would have preceded him as a pro had he not taken a job at a distillery to support his family. And Thome himself likely never would have made it if not for the input, advice and never-ending support of his father Chuck Jr., himself a star in Peoria's Sunday morning semi-pro softball league.

With bat and ball firmly embedded in his background, it's no surprise that Thome shined on the diamond, though it was his brother Randy's urging that he move from the right-hand side of the plate to the left-hand side around the age of 5 or 6 that really sprung him there.

But Thome was actually a two-sport star, an earner of all-state honors in baseball and basketball at Limestone High School.

"I was so fortunate and so proud that I grew up where I did," he said. "Peoria was such a special place. The people there are so special. All my high school coaches, youth coaches, my dad, my brothers who motivated and pushed me, my

buddies, our high school team... all those players through high school that we were fortunate to be around and have fun with and play the game, it was just so special. I love Peoria. It's where it all started."

But Major League teams didn't catch on to Thome in Peoria. He went undrafted out of high school. It took a scout's intuition in an unlikely place to get him the opportunity he needed — and that opportunity would appropriately come in a Midwest market that fit Thome's unassuming style so well.

THE SCOUT STORY

The Illinois Central College Cougars were between games of a doubleheader in the spring of 1989 when Tom Couston approached the club's gangly shortstop from behind.

"Stand right there and don't turn around," Couston told Thome. "Act like you're not talking to me."

Couston was a scout for the Indians, and he didn't want any of the other scouts on hand to know he was interested in Thome.

"If we draft you," Couston asked Thome, "will you sign?"

Thome was stunned for a second. Then he answered.

"Draft me!"

And that's how it happened. That's how the Indians officially began their relationship with the man who would become the most prolific slugger in franchise history.

In a story that mirrors the folkloric tale of Cy Slapnicka finding Bob Feller in the Iowa cornfields,

WE HALL OF FAME



“**THAT WAS THE FIRST TIME A JIM THOME HOMER IMPACTED THE INDIANS. IT WAS FAR FROM THE LAST.**”

Couston plucked Thome virtually out of nowhere. Thome had just struck out in a crucial situation when Couston approached him. But the scout loved the way the kid hustled, saw something in his swing, had that gut feeling that those in search of the Next Big Thing sometimes have to ride for all it's worth. Even in the smallest of samples and low-profile of settings, Couston thought Thome might amount to something, and that June he implored the Indians to take Thome with the 333rd overall pick in the amateur draft.

It was the 13th round and, well, we can safely say now that it was a lucky 13. There were 26 players taken in that round. To say that Thome was the only one of the 26 to reach the Hall of Fame is to state the obvious. But only one other guy – right-hander Mike Oquist, who went at No. 323 overall – even reached the big leagues. Heck, the only other pickup in that 13th round in '89 who went on to have a sustained career at the highest level of his sport was Oakland A's draftee Rodney Peete... the eventual NFL quarterback.

Thome himself had some visions of grandeur in another athletic avenue. He still loved the hardwood. But the Indians' opportunity proved too good to pass up. And with the help of one very specific coach in the Indians' system, he would maximize that opportunity.

THE COACH STORY

On the morning of the announcement, before all the hubbub associated with getting into the Hall was about to swallow up his schedule, Thome had a warm, emotion-packed phone call with the man whose impact on his career was outsized.

Charlie Manuel was on the other end of the line, and that's not atypical for these two. Formerly pupil and student, Thome and Manuel have become, in Thome's wife Andrea's words, "like father and son," and they talk at least a couple times a month.

This call was a little bit different than the rest. With Thome, at that moment, on the cusp of selection into baseball's most prestigious place, Manuel was very much a proud "father."

"It's just so special," Thome said about their relationship. "I would not be [in the Hall] if it wasn't for him. I can truly and honestly say that. What he meant to my career, what he meant to me personally, the changes that we made. Yes, I think I had to do it, but I think what he did so well is he made every player feel like they were a great player. I reaped the rewards of his thought process with that."

The process occurred in the spring of 1990. Thome, who shifted from short to third, had had an uninspiring start to his professional career, batting .237 with zero homers in 55 games at the Tribe's Gulf Coast League affiliate in '89. Manuel was a hitting coach in the organization, and, after watching the kid in the cage, he proposed that Thome open up his stance.

"I wanted to put him close to the plate, yet I didn't want to lose his strength to the opposite field," Manuel said. "Therefore I opened him up, put him a little bit so his back foot was close to the plate. I told him I wanted him to keep his rear end under him and instead of stepping right toward the pitcher, he would be stepping right there where the corner of the grass is on the right. It was very important that he stayed in a good, strong hitting position. Once we did that, he started hitting balls all over the yard. Started pulling the ball strong and hitting the ball hard the other way, too."

There was one other element to all this: The Roy Hobbs pose. The Thome mystique is incomplete without it.

Manuel and Thome liked the way Robert Redford, in the movie "The Natural," holds the bat out in front of himself with his right hand, shoulder high, in his setup. So they tried it. And from that point forward, basically, Thome was himself a natural. He hit .340 with 16 homers across two levels in 1990 and began to find his way on top prospects lists. He split the 1991 season between Double-A and at Triple-A, where Manuel was the manager.

It was in September of that year, just two years and a few months removed from playing for Illinois Central, that a 20-year-old Thome reached the big leagues for the first time. The Indians won just 57 games that year, but one of those victories was clinched when the baby-faced infielder from Peoria smacked a two-run shot off Steve Farr on Oct. 4.

That was the first time a Jim Thome homer impacted the Indians. It was far from the last.

THE STATS STORY

When Jim Thome was growing up, he knelt at the throne of a king... or a Kingman, rather. Dave Kingman, he of the 442 career homers and 1,816 career strikeouts, was his baseball hero, and Thome would do a pretty good job in his own career of following the Kingman model of power and punchouts (in baseball history, only Reggie Jackson struck out more than Thome).

But the comparison to Kingman ends there. Because Thome added another "p" to the equation: patience. Indeed, his career on-base percentage of .402 was a full 100 points higher than that of Kingman.

All of which is to say Thome put himself in some extremely rare statistical terrain. We're talking about a player who notched an at-bats-per-home-run rate (13.76) bested only by Mark McGwire (10.61), Babe Ruth (11.76) and Barry Bonds (12.92) AND put up an OBP one point higher than that of Hall of Fame leadoff man Rickey Henderson.

It's what made Thome so special, and it's what made comparisons to Hall of Famer Harmon Killebrew -- another slugger with Paul Bunyan-like strength and a heart of gold -- far more apt than any comparison to Kingman.

Thome's career will primarily be noted for his inclusion in the exclusive 600-home run club, which holds just nine men. But simply because Thome, through no fault of his own, played at a time when the 600 mark became watered down slightly by the game's power surge, it's the 1,747 walks (seventh all-time) that add weight to that waypost.

To strike out at least 2,000 times with an OBP of .400 is unheard of. Quite literally, nobody else in baseball has done it. You want to know Thome's batting average in plate appearances in which he didn't walk or strike out? It's .396. Crazyiness.

There's one other Thome stat that requires recognition: 13. No, that's not another reference to his draft round. That's how many walk-off home runs Thome hit in his career. The most all-time.

"As a young player, you go through this phase of anxiety," he said. "As you evolve as a player, you want to take that pressure off of yourself. As my career evolved, I wanted to be in a situation where you have a chance to win a game."

All of this is to say Jim Thome gave his team a chance to win many games -- in Cleveland and elsewhere. With the Indians, he compiled franchise records in homers (337) and walks (1,008) and win probability added (32.1). He also hit the most prodigious blast in Progressive Field history -- a 511-footer in 1999. That's all impressive stuff.



Photo: Gregory Drezdson



Photo: Gregory Drezdson

But in Cleveland, they don't remember the numbers. They remember the man.

THE LEGACY STORY

Jim Thome caught the out that sent the Indians to their first postseason appearance in 41 years. It was a lazy pop-up, an easy play, and by that point in early September 1995, in the midst of a strike-shortened 144-game season in which the Indians somehow won 100 games, it was a foregone conclusion that the American League Central was in hand. Thome's catch just made it official.

But that didn't make the play any less special for a franchise and for a city that for too long endured bad baseball in a bad ballpark while serving as the butt of bad jokes. Thome was one of many homegrown products and wily pickups that made the Indians such a devastatingly dominant ballclub upon arrival to the sparkling new stadium at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario. But his induction into the Hall of Fame makes him the official face of the Tribe's mid-90s renaissance.

"It means everything," he said. "When a team drafts you and you're able to wear that hat and go in, I don't think it gets any better. With our teams in the '90s and all those early stages in the Minor Leagues with Dave Keller, Johnny Goryl, Brian Graham, Mark Shapiro, Dan O'Dowd... I could name the names all day long. But it's so great, too, what it did for that city. How we transcended from moving from the old ballpark to The Jake and to watch that city become what it is now. There was so much electricity, and we brought so much excitement. To go in as an Indian, I feel so honored. You're talking a storied franchise that's been around forever. It's an honor to do it."

Only 12 other players have been immortalized in Cooperstown's gallery wearing a Cleveland Indians cap. The last such player voted in by the Baseball Writers' Association of America was Bob Lemon, way back in 1976. So Thome's Hall call represents something bigger than just Thome.

There was a time when this was all a little more complicated. With the Indians' ballpark-opening run of greatness wound down, Thome left Cleveland -- the place where he made his mark and met his wife -- bound for Philadelphia in free agency before the 2003 season. It hurt. It was a move governed by money, and there's always a sense of bitterness when fiscal finality overtakes the concept of constancy. Looking back, it's pretty easy to assert that the divorce might have been necessary, that an Indians team in dire need of a rebuild on the farm would have had a cumbersome contract on its hands and, perhaps, not done the fun things it did in that run to the 2007 ALCS.

But yeah, Thome was persona non grata among Indians fans for a while there. He logged three years in Philadelphia before getting dealt to the White Sox, and that meant multiple trips to his old park and multiple choruses from the boo birds each year. His 500th and 600th home runs would come not in a Tribe uniform but in the colors of division rivals in Chicago and in Minnesota. Through it all, Thome was on a nomadic quest for a World Series title that would never materialize, and the folks in the Indians' front office were rooting him on from afar, until or unless their goals came into direct conflict. It was all pretty weird.

Until 2011. That August, the Indians found themselves on the fringes of contention, and Thome, in the final year of his deal with the Twins, had just notched No. 600. There was nothing tying

him to Minnesota anymore, and the Indians and Twins found a way to make it work on the waiver wire, even as Thome himself was worried about how he'd be perceived.

"Jimmy was so nervous about coming back," Sandy Alomar Jr. said. "He wanted to come back so bad. We'd talked on the phone a few times, and he was so nervous about it, about peoples' reaction. And rightfully so. He had a huge contract in Philly, but that's baseball. Our fans are going to get mad, because they don't want to lose people of that caliber. It's a natural reaction from fans. They get upset about teams stealing our players and stuff like that. I told Jimmy, 'They love you here, man. You're one of the most prolific players who has played this game. The people here, they love you. They're going to give you a standing ovation.' He was like, 'I don't know about that.' He was nervous."

Thome had nothing to be nervous about. The response to his brief-but-uplifting return was rapturous, and Thome was welcomed home.

Now, there is no more awkwardness when it comes to the Indians and Jim Thome. He has a statue at Progressive Field. He has the one-day contract he signed with the Tribe when he officially hung up his big-league cleats for good. And quite soon, the aw-shucks slugger plucked out of Peoria will have a plaque in Cooperstown bearing his name and the logo of his "hometown" team.

It's a pretty good story, don't you think?



**BUT IN CLEVELAND,
THEY DON'T REMEMBER
THE NUMBERS.**

**THEY
REMEMBER
THE
MAN.**

Photo: Gregory Drezdson

Feller was off in Game 6, allowing seven runs in 6 1/3 innings in front of a then World Series-record crowd of 86,288 at Cleveland Stadium. That only delayed the inevitable. Lemon and Bearden once again delivered – this time in the same game – to clinch it in Game 6. Lemon worked into the eighth and Bearden finished off a 4-3 win with 1 2/3 shutout frames.

Eddie Robinson, who is the last living member of the 1948 Indians, knocked in the decisive run in the eighth inning against the great Warren Spahn.

“That was such an exciting time,” Robinson said in an interview with MLB Network Radio in 2016, during the Indians’ most recent trip to the Fall Classic. “All we wanted to do was win the American League pennant. Once we did that, we were a little bit free and easier in the World Series.”

THE JIM THOME STATUE

Winning on the road at Braves Field made for party that spanned 600-plus miles across multiple states. The champagne flowed in the dining car on the train back to Cleveland, with players toasting Boudreau and popping corks deep into the night.

When the train pulled into Cleveland, railroad officials complained about the damage done to the dining car.

Famously, Veeck replied: “Don’t worry, we’ll buy you a new one!”

Confetti fell from downtown buildings and thousands of fans lined Euclid Ave. for a victory parade that ended in University Circle. An estimated 175,000 fans flocked to Public Square to welcome their champions home.

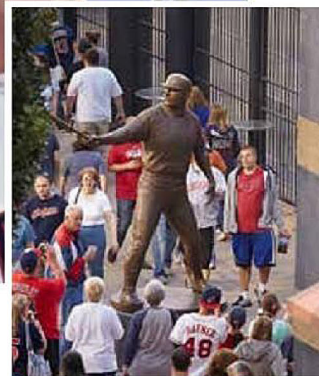
No one involved in that celebration could have known the Indians would be without another World Series title for the 69 years that followed.

In 1949, when it was clear that the Tribe was not going to repeat as world

champions, Veeck held a mock funeral for the ‘48 World Series banner. There was a coffin and everything. The pennant, which read, “1948 WORLD CHAMPION CLEVELAND INDIANS” was buried in center field at the old stadium. To this day, no one knows the location of that banner.

Fedor notes that there was a published photograph of a grounds crew member holding the flag in the 1960s. That is possibly that last image of the last World Series flag won by

Photo: Gregory Drezdson



the Indians. Whether it was thrown out or wound up in someone’s basement is anyone’s guess.

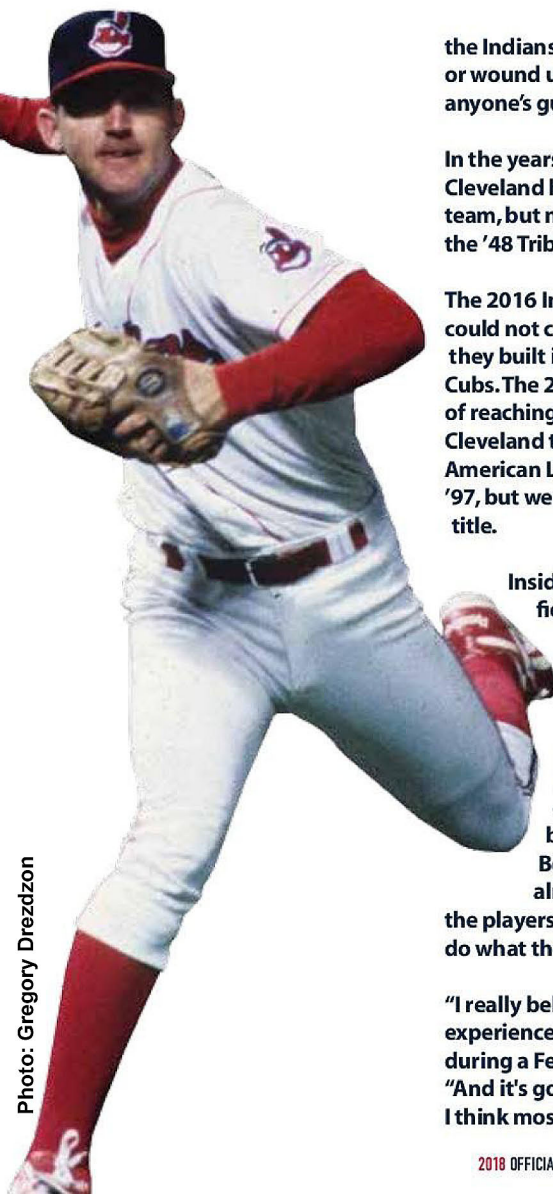
In the years that have followed, Cleveland has fielded many a great team, but none could finish the job like the ‘48 Tribe.

The 2016 Indians came oh so close, but could not capitalize on the 3-1 lead they built in the Series against the Cubs. The 2007 Tribe came one win shy of reaching the Fall Classic. The great Cleveland teams of the 1990s won the American League pennant in ‘95 and ‘97, but were unable to bring home a title.

Inside Progressive Field’s center field gate, there is another statue, one of slugger Jim Thome. That large bronzed image of the former slugger – the Indians’ all-time home run king and now a Hall of Famer – is pointing his bat in the direction of Feller, Boudreau and Doby. It is almost as if Thome is saying to the players on the field behind him, “Go do what they did.”

“I really believe that the city is going to experience a World Series,” Thome said during a February trip to Cleveland. “And it’s going to happen quicker than I think most people think.”

Photo: Gregory Drezdson





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